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Presentation 2: Harlem Readings

The six Harlem Renaissance readings assigned for this week cover a wide array of topics. The loss of innocence, abandonment, personal relationships, and shifting gender roles are present among the many other struggles that authors Jean Toomer, Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston present in their works. Together these stories can be combined to emphasize four common themes that were key to the historical and cultural time period that they were written in. I argue that issues of age, race, gender, and domesticity in these readings all intertwine to speak to a wide range of domestic issues during the early 20th century.

The theme of age and the feeling of growing up too fast are brought to light in McKay’s two poems, “The Harlem Dancer” and “Harlem Shadows”. In both poems the aspect of youth is placed in contexts of adult themes, such as in “The Harlem Dancer” where the audience is full of “youths with young prostitutes”(line 1) watching a beautiful young black girl, dressed provocatively, dance. In “Harlem Shadows”, McKay draws attention to the aspect that it is little “girls” who walk the streets at night as prostitutes; not young women. Both poems also show the negative effect of this type of loss of innocence, the young dancer is “falsely-smiling” trying to escape her world and the other young girls are poor, dishonored and disgraced.

Race plays a significant factor in all six of he readings, particularly because it was a topic of much heat and discussion during the Harlem renaissance; there was still segregation and the mixing of races was not well accepted. Jean Toomer, being of mixed race himself was know for is book *Cane* witch includesthe two excerpts we read, “Blood-Burning Moon” and “Becky”.

These stories focused on interracial relationships both in their impact on the people in the relationship and those who witnessed it. In “Becky”, a white woman bore two black sons and was shunned and abandoned by her town and forced to live on her own. This shows that even though she was a white woman being with a black man was a taboo and race mixing of any kind was a sensitive issue. In Toomer’s other short story, we see how physically destructive interracial love can be. Louisa’s two lovers, of different races, each offered her a different type of life and jealously resulted in their deaths. Bob Stone’s dying word that a black man was responsible for his death was proof enough, during that time, that Tom Burwell was guilty and therefore was the killed by white men without a trial.

Gender is also an important theme that runs though these readings. In both races women were seen a lesser person than their male counterparts, leaving women often sexually coveted yet socially low on the food chain. In Toomer’s story “Karintha” the desire for a young girl is immediately addressed with the opening lines “Men had always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child...”(1). Karintha had traits that were not desired but they were over looked for her beauty, and although still a child herself she had a child and many male admirers who seemed to take her innocence too soon. Each of the six readings are centered around women, men may have an influence in their life but the stories are about their plight, or situation in life and about whether they can escape or stay trapped and in their place.

Age, Race, and Gender can all be reflected to parts of domesticity, but in these readings, especially “Sweat” by Hurston domesticity is focused on the role of the woman in the household. This story has a unique perceptive on what a woman can accomplish on her own. The main character, Delia Jones, is a hard worker, she washes other women’s clothes and has used the money to financially secure herself and her husband, who beats her and has also taken a mistress. When thinking of gender roles Jones both fits the domestic side because she takes care of her home, the house she had made into a home was “built for her old days” and to her it “was lovely”(3). While she takes pride in her work, her home, and her dedication to a 15-year marriage, she breaks the domestic boundaries by being the provider for the family. Her job has paid the bills and after years of physical and mental abuse from her husband she stood up to him. This moment show the pivotal change of gender roles, in a sense she has taken on both, being a provider and a caretaker.

The Harlem Renaissance was a time for growth and expansion of black culture. The six readings that have been assigned cover the many topics that influenced black community, but the common thread that links these stories are how age, race, gender, and domesticity intertwine to create stories with different plots but similar mindsets.



I chose this photo because it is how I imagined Hurston’s character Delia Jones to look like in the short story “Sweat”. The woman in this photo and Jones are both strong independent women who don’t appear afraid to earn a living (by cleaning white peoples clothing). Which brings up the theme of gender roles, and domesticity; While Jones is still doing “woman’s work” in her home she also portrays a sense of liberation because she is working and bringing in an income therefore becoming the “breadwinner” of the household.

Work Cited:

Photo:  Kasebier, Gertrude. *Young woman working amid clotheslines heavy with sheets and stockings*. 1902. Newport, Rhode Island. Photograph. <http://historyinphotos.blogspot.com/2013/07/gertrude-kasebier.html>. Date Accessed: September 17,2013